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Political World of Bob Dylan: Freedom and Justice, Power and Sin (Book Review)

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3. See also, for example, her guest appearance with astrophysicist Marcelo Gleiser on the radio show *On Being*, “The Mystery We Are,” January 2, 2014. The transcript can be found at <http://www.onbeing.org/program>.
4. See, for example, her 2015 Presidential Lecture in the Arts and Humanities at Stanford: <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2015/november/robinson-humanities-lecture-110315.html>

The Political World of Bob Dylan: Freedom and Justice, Power and Sin. Taylor, Jeff, and Chad Israelson, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 304pp. ISBN: 978-1137482341. Reviewed by Dave Schelhaas, Professor Emeritus of English, Dordt College.

For anyone who is a lifelong Dylanophile—and they are legion—this book is a treasure trove. It teems with historical material about the iconic artist’s life and career, with piquant Dylan quotations drawn from countless interviews, with analyses of lyrics (though, sadly, lyrics are not quoted in the book—probably because of copyright prohibitions) and analyses of his relationship with the Jesus people in the 1970s who were instrumental in his conversion. It establishes that from the time of his conversion Dylan has remained a believer in Jesus Christ. Most importantly, it integrates all of this data to defend a thesis concerning Dylan’s political and spiritual beliefs. *The Political World of Bob Dylan* explores Dylan’s relationship to many ideologies and movements, but at its core is the contention and the attempt to show that after his conversion Dylan became a Christian anarchist.

Chad Israelson, author of the first three chapters, writes about Dylan’s early years in Hibbing, Minnesota, living on the iron range where it was more of a stigma to be rich than poor. Here Dylan—then Robert Zimmerman—learned of the ravages caused by economic downturns. Here he developed from his Jewish tradition a sense of the sacred. Here he came to appreciate spirituality and recognize that Christianity and the Jewish faith were inextricably linked. But here he also learned that the demand for conformity was powerful in his small, tightly-knit community, and that he would have to leave it and “keep running” to fulfill his dreams.

In Chapter 2, “Voice of a Generation,” Israelson traces Dylan’s life from his early fame in the 1960s until the present. He shows how his music fits with some of the ideas of the New Left, the Peace Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement, and then he moves on to show Dylan’s continuing

influence and experiences up to the present.

Early in Chapter 3, Israelson writes that “over a span of a career from the early 1960s into the twenty-first century Dylan has called into question all power structures be they political, legal, economic or social” (94). He then goes on to illustrate this point by examining more than twenty of Dylan’s songs that deal with freedom and justice. Analyses of “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” and “Only a Pawn in Their Game” (about the shooting of Medgar Evers) are especially effective in showing Dylan’s nuanced understanding of evil. Dylan does not blame the deaths of Carroll and Evers simply on the evil men who killed them but on “a system of institutional racism that pitted poor whites against Blacks” and the “absence of legal equality” (99). Here, perhaps, we see the beginnings of Dylan as anarchist.

What, you may ask, is a Christian anarchist? The word *anarchy* usually means a “state of lawlessness or political disorder brought about by the absence of government” and is often associated with people who go around blowing up government buildings. This is *not* the meaning of “Christian anarchist.”

According to Jeff Taylor, the primary author of the last four chapters, “when used in its political, non-pejorative sense, anarchy refers to the absence of political authority,” and “anarchists are persons who advocate the elimination of government” but without violence. People who embrace this philosophy for “Christian” reasons are Christian anarchists. Examples of Christian anarchists given by Taylor are Leo Tolstoy and Albert Schweitzer.

Using H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* with its five responses to culture, Taylor places Christian anarchism in the “Christ Against Culture” category. He notes that even before he became a Christian, Dylan, with his protest

songs and “finger-pointing material,” took an “adversarial stance vis-à-vis the dominant trends and institutions of society. His conversion to Christianity in 1978...was a clarifying, broadening and deepening of his position” (144).

Christian anarchism, according to Taylor, has nine bases. These are theological concepts such as the sovereignty of God, human free will, universality of the fall, and the nature of the New Covenant. In addition, Dylan has based his “spiritually inspired anarchism” on three specific ways of viewing the world and living his life: eschatological, ethical, and counter-cultural. Taylor examines Dylan’s words and lyrics in the light of these concepts to establish that in both his lyrics and his public pronouncements he espouses a Christian anarchist perspective.

For example, Dylan’s belief in the sovereignty of God, evident in a line from “Gonna Change My Way of Thinking”: “God’s authority is the only true authority,” leads Dylan to conclude that human governments are unnecessary—a basic premise of Christian anarchists.

In the discussion of the nature of the New Covenant, Taylor says, “Bob Dylan’s recognition that God primarily deals with individuals rather than nation states . . . stretches back to the 1960s” (155). Taylor shows that many of Dylan’s lyrics (in such songs as “Masters of War” and “Are You Ready”) speak of the judgment of God upon individuals’ wickedness and not that of nation-states, inferring from this that governments are unnecessary. Taylor says that Dylan “believes that most human authority is illegitimate in its foundation or perverted in its practice” (155). If we must have government, Dylan and the Christian anarchists would say a decentralized democracy is the best form of government.

The more centralized a government gets, the more unjust and self-serving it becomes, in the view of Dylan. In 1984 Dylan said, “I think politics is an instrument of the devil” (196). Asked about the 2000 election he said, “In the larger scheme of things, the government is irrelevant. Everybody, everything can be bought” (196). Like Bernie Sanders today, Dylan believes that the wealthy, the corporations, have long since bought out the politicians. But while Sanders proposes change through government, Dylan and the Christian anarchist, as I understand it, wait for God to do

something. Along with that they advocate personal responsibility and acts of charity.

“The message of Dylan’s first all-electric album, *Highway 61 Revisited*,” writes Taylor, is that “protest is not going to change the world. Change yourself and you will change the world” (195). Looking at conditions in some of the towns where he holds concerts, Dylan says, “I’m totally convinced that people need Jesus Christ. Look at the junkies and the winos and the troubled people. It’s all a sickness that can be healed in an instant. The powers that be won’t let that happen. The powers that be say it has to be healed politically” (195). And politics are corrupt.

All in all, Taylor and Israelson competently defend their thesis that Dylan is a Christian anarchist, but it is important to point out—and I think they would agree—that Dylan would never accept such a defining epithet. “I can’t understand the values of definition and confinement,” he once said. “Definition destroys” (109). Not only does he refuse to be confined to an ideology, his capricious temperament and mercurial opinions and behavior make it very difficult to do so. To their credit, Taylor and Israelson acknowledge this (199).

Nevertheless, several things about the authors’ thesis and argument bother me. My first question has to do with the source of the defining characteristics of Christian anarchism. In a book that had over nine hundred footnotes, one would expect some documentation, some authoritative source for Christian anarchism’s nine bases and three ways of viewing the world. But there’s nothing. Who are the architects of this idea or movement called Christian Anarchism? Without sufficient documentation, we don’t know for sure.

A second concern has to do with the occasional careless definition. In the discussion of eschatology, Taylor writes, “Eschatology is a basis of Christian anarchism because it stresses forthcoming divine intervention in human history in order to bring about peace and justice on earth, thus encouraging people to shift their hopes from earthly politics and human government to heavenly realities and divine government” (198). It’s not clear to me whether this is Taylor’s opinion or that of the Christian Anarchist, but it strikes me as simplistic, either-or thinking. As most advocates of the “Christ Transforming Culture” category would say,

one can believe that governments are instituted by God to do good *and also* believe that Christ will return some day to set all things right.

I have sensed, as I read the sections on Christian anarchism, that the authors have some sympathy for the idea. In their conclusion, for example, the authors lament the lack of a prominent Christian anarchist (though is Dylan not prominent?) in the United States or elsewhere, suggesting this indicates how standardized and compromised American Christianity has become. While I agree with their assessment of much American Christianity, I don't think a prominent Christian Anarchist—by herself—would make a difference. And anarchists almost by definition are always by

themselves.

It is the very individualism of anarchism that I find most off-putting. Dylan says that God addresses only individuals, not nation-states. I would say that in the New Testament, God most often addresses not individuals but the church, and I see no evidence of the church playing any kind of role in Christian anarchism.

Having said all that, I am grateful to Taylor and Israelson for teaching me so much about the life and work of Bob Dylan, probably the most significant musical voice of his time, and also for introducing me to Christian anarchism. A further discussion of this philosophy would be a fruitful endeavor at Dordt College and beyond.